Maurice Fuller

Hi everyone. I'm Maurice Fuller, and thanks for joining us. Today I'm with Steve Gipson, a partner with Recruiters Websites. Steve is an expert on websites and marketing automation for staffing firms, and I'm excited to hear more on his views about how to leverage marketing to amplify your efforts on the sales and recruiting side. We're going to be focusing on optimizing marketing programs to track candidates and new clients more efficiently using state of the art marketing technology. Steve, welcome, and thanks for joining me today.

Steve Gipson

Thanks, Maurice. Thanks for having me.

MF

Could you start by giving us a brief snapshot of your background and tell us a bit about your experience?

SG

Sure. So with Recruiters Websites, we try to be pretty literal with our name. We help recruiting and staffing firms find ways to better optimize their digital presence and find ways for them to become more visible to those clients and candidates. The way we got into this is like a lot of other recruiters and staffing organizations and individuals that have found themselves in this industry: we grew up around it.

Myself and my brother started this organization in 2012, and Jeff really is the brains of everything. If he hears this, I don't want him to get too big headed. But really, he helped start this organization. The firm that we were a part of was our father's organization. He brought us on board—myself, my brother, and our sister—and he taught us the business of recruiting. We worked specifically within the property and casualty insurance industry. It was a very niche focus on what we did.

Jeff took it upon himself to build that website and started working with our digital presence, and different firms and organizations started reaching out to us that were part of recruiting associations. They asked us who did the site, and we just sent them to Jeff; "Hey, take care of it. Talk to them." So he started doing that, moonlighting and doing that on his own time. Anybody who has worked a desk knows that recruiting is a full-time job and then some. As Jeff got more interested in this and more excited about the opportunity and what that offered, obviously he was pulling away from his desk and doing the work at night, so we just stepped back. We asked, does this make sense to do full-time?

And of course the answer was yes. So we opened Recruiters Websites in 2012, and since then when we just started with Jeff, our team has grown organically over the years. It's coming up on our tenth year anniversary in December, and there's eleven of us in our offices here just south of St. Louis in Cape Girardeau, Missouri. We help from all aspects

now, more than just websites, all the way to a full-service digital marketing agency. One thing we do is that everything is done here in-house in Cape Girardeau, helping our clients be able to find as many opportunities to build those new relationships with those prospective clients and candidates.

MF

Fascinating to hear that backstory, and kudos on reaching your ten year anniversary. That's a significant success. I wanted to ask you your thoughts on what most staffing firms are missing when they approach their digital presence.

SG

Sure. It's one of those things that seems kind of daunting when you're looking out in the world of a digital landscape. But most companies when they approach that, whether it's from a website, whether it's from marketing, whatever it may be in order to get the brand more aware and more upfront for digital clients and candidates, they forget about that first step, which is really the overall strategy of who you want to be. Who we are as an organization, who are our clients, who are our candidates, what do we want them to know about us?

You need to develop a strategy and set a goal and objectives, things that are measurable, that allow you to see, ok, we're being successful or we're not being successful. So many firms skip that part and they jump right into wanting a pretty design, or wanting to run digital ads, or wanting to be active on social media. But if you're doing all that without a strategy actually in place that's guiding everything that you do… Even down to the smallest LinkedIn post, everything should serve the purpose of that strategy to allow you to be able to say, ok great, this is our end goal, this is where we need to be, here's the strategy in place to be able to accomplish that, and here are the posts to be able to do that. Here is the website that's able to do that. Here are the pages that we're creating on that website to be able to take us there. These are the platforms that we're going to be engaging in. Everything that we do should follow that line of thought, then that allows us to be a lot more succinct in what we're doing.

I think so many firms miss that one little element, and it seems small, but really it sets the foundation and guidelines for everything that they're doing once they start to want to expand their visibility and their presence online.

MF

That reminds me of the famous statement: if I had two hours to cut a tree, I would spend ninety minutes sharpening the knife. It's really about getting that strategy right, and I assume when you work with your clients, you build a strategy document to get crisp with that strategy that you're going to implement.

SG

Yes, we do. I think one of the greatest things about this industry is that the people that come from that respective industry that they're servicing, maybe they haven't jumped into the recruiting or staffing industry or maybe this is their first endeavor, a lot of the time are looking for ways to be able to capitalize and do some of these things themselves. Being able to take a pen and paper and start writing down who you feel like you are, why you're doing this, where you want to go, and where you want to be in two and three and five years—all of these are things we can do on our own.

That strategy doesn't have to be overly complex or the most sophisticated marketing plan in the world. It can be as simple as who we are, who we want to be, why we want to help individuals with their careers, why we want to help organizations grow, and where we can take them. It can be very therapeutic in that sense, whether you're a startup company or your company has been doing this for twenty years. We evolve and we change within the industry, even to who we're servicing. We may be working in this industry for ten years, and all of a sudden the hiring manager that we're engaged with says "Hey, I talked to Susie over here in manufacturing and they need some really big help. Can you help them?" The firm is going to say yeah, let's do it, and then that evolves and becomes a part of who they are now. Now they do manufacturing *and* IT.

When we're talking about our strategy, it's about being able to sit that down and say, do we want to expand to other industries? Do we want to be very focused on this? Anybody can do that themselves and start using that guideline to be able to engage through the world of the internet.

MF

I always like to think of marketing as an investment. You're investing resources to build relationships and to help amplify those relationships that you're building. How important is long-term consistency in the overall success of these marketing programs?

SG

It's everything. So many times, we look at running an ad or we look at being active on social media in the same way that we look at a lot of changes in our own lives, I feel like. If I want to start a new workout routine—let's use a new year's resolution as an example. I come out on January 1st saying I'm going to hit the gym every single day. I'm going to get up at 5am, I'm going to run two miles, I'm going to lift for an hour, then afterwards I'm going to do yoga and stretch. Every single day. Well, that's not sustainable. Guess who's going to burn out in about a day? There's no way.

So when people look at their marketing, they look at it as more one: as a chore, not an investment, and then two: they look at it as an all or nothing. Not everything that we do should be an all or nothing. It should be more about that principle of a little bit here and a little bit there in building upon what we are as an organization. We should think about it from that perspective.

My wife's a dietician, so she always hammers me about health. Use that mindset of a diet. We're not always necessarily supposed to be on a diet; we should be eating from a healthy lifestyle perspective. It's all about being consistent in what we do in how we're eating food. It's the same thing with marketing. We should be consistent in what we do, knowing that it's something that's sustainable in the long-term. Don't go out and spend your whole budget in a month. Take that budget, whatever you've determined (this is part of that strategy), whatever budget that makes the most sense for your firm, and portion that out over an extended period of time that allows you to be consistent and continue to grow and build that presence online through those different platforms.

It has to carry forever. Right now we are in a candidate driven market. Everybody needs candidates. I get so many calls: "Steve, I need candidates now." A year ago, it was "Steve, I need as many job orders as I can possibly get. I'm hurting for job orders." And guess what? Probably in a year from now, we're going to have "Steve, I need job orders." It's because of the ebb and flow of our industry. It's what happens. So if we're consistent in what we're doing, it's not so much starting up a marketing campaign when we need something, but it's about adding another element or maybe emphasizing an element when we need that. It's not starting from zero every time, going from month one to all or nothing. You're going from hey, we're already halfway going or we have a really good foundation in place, and we just need to emphasize this.

MF

That makes complete sense. It's something that you're continuously doing. Maybe there are times when you dial up your marketing on the candidate side, maybe there's times when you dial up marketing on the client side, but you've laid the foundation so that you have the ability to dial up however you want to in the areas where you need to attract either candidates or business.

I wanted to talk a little bit about social media as an essential part of your overall marketing program. How do successful staffing and recruiting firms think about social media? How do they best take advantage of that?

SG

What's interesting about social media is it's all these wonderful platforms with opportunities and ways to get in front of our audiences, and we're probably going to say this a thousand times during this conversation, but it all goes back to our strategy. Who is our audience and where do they live? Within that, our goal should be to—from a successful strategy within a staffing or recruiting firm—take them wherever they are on that platform, engage with them, be visible, use it for what it is, but the ideal purpose is to get them from that platform to our website, and to our brand.

On LinkedIn, for example, where a lot of us from staffing and recruiting spend our time, they are engaging that platform. Maybe we're in dialogue with them, maybe they're even on our company page, they're engaging on our post, whatever it may be, but ultimately

when they click on my profile, on the right hand side they see People Also View 10 Other People Like This. And there's ten other people, men and women that look like me, that have profiles like me, but they're not. Ultimately we want to take them from that platform to our website so then they're immersed in our brand. They're engaging with the content that we created. They're engaging with our articles, our testimonials, our job orders, all those things that get them involved with who we are and what we do.

All of our goals, no matter what platform we're on, the frequency of posting, all those things should be determined with the goal to drive them back to our brand.

MF

That makes complete sense. Speaking of our brand and our website, let's talk about effective websites, which is one of your core capabilities, building world-class websites. Tell us what firms should expect from their websites?

SG

One: they should expect it to make a great impression. Like we tell our candidates before they go out on interviews, make sure you make a great first impression. For some reason that is lost when we're applying it to our own brand. So that's number one. It should redirect your expertise, make a great first impression, and be a resource that works for you 24/7. As people are responding to your emails, they're getting referred to you, they're responding to your voicemails… All the things that recruiters do on a daily basis, this website should back that up.

Number two: it should drive business in. It shouldn't be just a platform to make a beautiful business card or brochure; it should actively be able to drive individual clients and candidates to us, to engage with us, so we have an opportunity to build a relationship with them. Whether we have a position that fits their background now or whether we can partner with an organization at this moment, we should want the website to drive more people to us so we can have more conversations, which turn into more relationships, which then turn into more placements.

MF

That makes complete sense. A really important part of website design is SEO or search engine optimization. Could you help us understand what SEO is, and does it actually drive results? A lot of people wonder about that. Is it worthwhile making this investment to have effective SEO on your website?

SG

It really is. Search Engine Optimization, or SEO, is a process of essentially us telling the search engine what our website is about. Search engines want to know what a credible source is and what a relevant source is to a search. So if someone is typing in "IT staffing firms," they want to know that the results that they're pulling up in the first ten spots on Google are the most relevant and credible sources they can, because then it

allows them to say, hey, we're the best search firm out there. SEO is really the practice of being able to tell them what that site is about. Implementing key words, making sure that you have meta titles, descriptions, content: all these things relate to what the search engines are looking for to tell what that website is about, or even what that particular page on a website is about.

It is so effective if it's done right. It's really effective because a lot of firms don't take the time to do it. There are different levels to it. One: you should have some of what we call foundations in place when a website is built. Then there's the ongoing practices, and we like it from a very content-driven strategy and a very content-driven focus, creating articles and information and things that expand the depth of your website. We like things that are going to educate, not just things that are click-baity and key word dense pages just for the sake of being key word dense, but information that can actually be applied to their clients and candidates to help them understand who you are and what you guys do. And it also drives you up in the search engines.

Taking advantage of these practices puts most firms a step ahead of the majority of the industry. Take any 80/20 type of rule kind of concept within this. 80% of people or firms are not doing this on their website, and 20% are. That 20% are those that are getting business through the search engines. Doing it consistently over time allows them to be successful.

MF

Then I would imagine that some parts of that SEO, for example on the careers pages, is particularly important if you want to get your jobs indexed properly and whatnot.

SG

Yeah, it really is. Google has a certain set of guidelines that they want us to follow when building that job board. A lot of organizations are using things like iFrames or branded pages from their applicant tracking systems when they're posting those jobs. Unfortunately, most of the time, those pages aren't being indexed. So if you have fifty jobs open and you're not actually posting those jobs to your website through some automation or some type of process, you're missing out on fifty pages of relevant information that could be used to drive candidates to your website—and even clients when they're looking for recruiters.

MF

Briefly, what are your thoughts on staffing ATS systems and what staffing firms should be doing to get the most out of their ATS?

SG

When we talk about applicant tracking systems within the industry, "who are you using?" is probably the most asked question on any public forum or group that revolves around staffing firms. "Why are you using them? I hate these guys now—what do you think

about them?" All of those questions come up. Ultimately, an ATS should be used to work a pipeline. It should be used to be able to recall data when you're working on a search. It should be used to be able to run your back office, especially if you're doing a lot of things in house from a staffing perspective. For each firm and person, their preference is going to be different. A workflow for me can be different than a workflow for you.

My advice is always just demo, demo, and demo to make sure before you make that switch. I went through three applicant tracking system switches when I was recruiting, and each one was a little bit more painful than the last, a little bit more expensive, and the data lost integrity because of all the migrations and things that take place. I don't have the one specific, perfect answer, but if we can find those that have the ability to handle all the information, all the back office systems we have in place, and expand upon API integrations, that's what we look for in an applicant tracking system.

MF

I agree, and what I like to say is that the ATS is the most important technology decision you will make for your staffing business. It's very important that you get that decision right, because everything else follows out of that.

Marketing automation is becoming incredibly important to the success of staffing firms. We're seeing that on the sales side, and we're seeing that on the recruiting side. We're seeing it in other forms of automation, the operational side, the compliance side, and so on. I wanted to get your views on marketing automation and what's working for staffing and recruiting firms today.

SG

Sure. Let's go back to that strategy because it should be a big part of what you're doing. Within marketing automation, we can run sequences and campaigns that follow along with what we're doing. Say we are running a digital ad, maybe for a particular industry that we're focusing on. Everyone that's coming to that page on our website from that ad can then fill out a form to gain some sort of white paper salary guide, something that's going to be important for them to know and gives them some sort of real information. When they do that, that then sends them on a journey. Now they're in our marketing automation system where, ideally, we're using something like HubSpot that's integrated with our API.

They go from our website, into the Applicant Tracking System, then into a journey within HubSpot. Now all that is automated and you don't have to think about it. They enter that journey, then all of a sudden they're sent on a campaign that takes them from this email to that email to this email—staying in front of them on regular intervals, based off of giving them real information, based off of what we're trying to accomplish within that campaign or with that initial digital ad that was sent out there. We're nurturing them through that system. They come to the website. They click on this—then they go on different parts of that journey, or different parts of that campaign. That allows us to get to

a place where we're in front of them and keep them engaged with our brand. That way when the right timing makes sense and they're ready to make a move or ready to hire, they can go, "Hey, let's call Steve at Recruiters Websites," we're ready to do that and engage them.

That is the way that that should work within our system, that it's integrated and working with everything that we're doing, from our website to our ATS into that marketing automation platform.

MF

We all know firms that have done a phenomenal job of connecting the dots and bringing all those different components together, from the emails they send out to ads they put up to retargeting on social media. They really build a close connection. That's how you amplify that relationship with marketing and get significant results.

I had one more question I wanted to run past you with respect to on demand staffing and gig economy. This area is growing so quickly now. What are your thoughts on that, and how is that affecting staffing and recruiting?

SG

I think it changes the dynamic in the way that they're engaging with our website. It makes our digital presence more important. I think the balance needs to be there. We can create platforms to allow them to be able to go on and engage in this candidate pool that we have. Ideally we can integrate this with a website and build a platform that allows that all to go there and build a profile for them. All you've got to do is click a button and it sends them right to your website, so your clients can go choose and peruse who makes the most sense. But ultimately, we don't want to lose the relationship aspect of our business.

Even if we are engaging with them in ways that are pick and choose and with more of a gig economy feel, I think staffing firms that can marry that with their ability to have customer service and engage in relationship building with those clients—and even with those candidates—and keep in touch with them, engage with them, be involved, build a community, those are the firms that are going to see success and be able to grow as the industry grows in this gig economy realm.

MF

Great insight and great advice for staffing firms that are headed in this direction. This has been an incredibly great conversation, Steve. I appreciate the time you've spent with us today. If you need help with your websites or marketing automation, I definitely recommend connecting with Steve Gipson over at Recruiters Websites. I'd like to thank everyone for listening, and I look forward to seeing you on the next Staffing Technology podcast.